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# EXHIBITIONISM



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en français.

This booklet is one of a series dealing with different types of crimes and their impact upon the victims, the offender and the public at large. While the booklets may be of general interest, they are designed primarily as a resource to be used by parents, teachers, youth workers, police and others who work with young people.



Provincial  
Secretariat  
for Justice

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Additional copies of the booklet can be obtained from the Ontario Government Book Store, 880 Bay Street, Toronto, Ontario M7A 1N8.

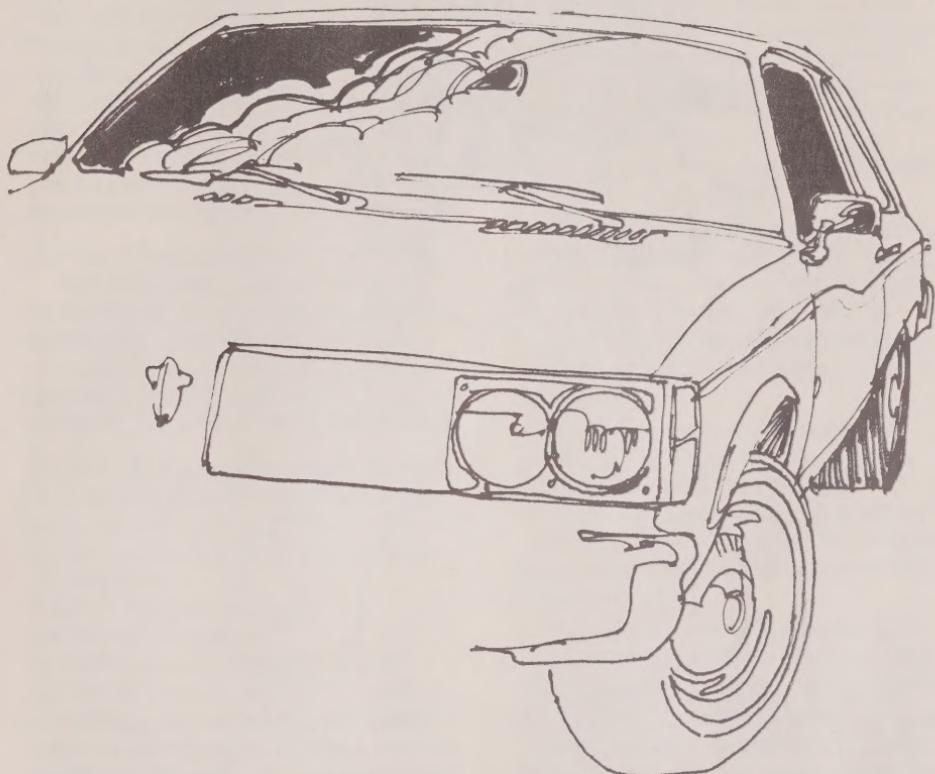
The Honourable Gord Walker, Q.C.,  
Provincial Secretary for Justice

The story and characters described in 'The Incident' portion of this booklet are fictitious. Any resemblance to persons living or dead is purely coincidental.

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# THE INCIDENT

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It was a bright sunny day and Sue had decided to walk to the store for a change. Lost in her own thoughts she failed to notice the young man signalling to her from his car and rapping on the window to catch her attention. "Could you give me some directions, please? I seem to be lost." Hearing the voice, she turned and walked towards the car. As she came close to the window she stopped in horror. The man had his genitals exposed and was

masturbating, while his eyes never left her face. "You filthy disgusting pig!", she shouted, and then bolted away. The stranger started up his car and drove off in the opposite direction before Sue was aware that she had not noted the licence number. When she turned back she realized angrily that she also hadn't looked at the young man's face and would not be able to describe him to the police.



The above incident is a typical example of Exhibitionism, a deviant behaviour that has become very common and widespread. When we think of what a typical Exhibitionist looks like, we usually picture an unshaven, broken-down old vagrant wandering through the streets flapping his tattered coat open and closed in an effort to reveal his exposed genitals to innocent female passersby. But the men who usually engage in this type of behaviour are otherwise good upstanding citizens whom one normally would never suspect — like the young stranger Sue saw in the parked car.

When Sue got home she was extremely upset. Her family wasn't much help to her because, like herself, they did not understand what Exhibitionism was all about. When told of what happened, her mother became worried, her brother laughed, and her father seethed with rage. Sue was totally confused and began to cry. Her suffering could have been greatly reduced if only she and her family had an understanding of the problem and how to deal with it properly.

## **What exactly is Exhibitionism?**

### **(a) The Legal Definition**

The Criminal Code of Canada classifies Exhibitionism under a general heading of *Disorderly Conduct*. It is not classified as a *Sexual Offence*. It is dealt with in Section 169, which covers "indecent" acts but not Exhibitionism per se. Historically, Section 169 combines two former offences — "public indecency" and "indecent exposure". The general law is most often applied to male Exhibitionist acts and can be used to prosecute, convict, and punish offenders. This law, like any law, does not attempt to explain or understand the behaviour.

### **(b) The Clinical Definition**

Exhibitionism has been clinically defined as the "expressed impulse to expose the male genital organ to an unsuspecting female as a final sexual gratification". Since this definition is so broad, let's examine it more closely.

#### **(1) What Exhibitionist Acts ARE NOT**

The clinical definition of Exhibitionist acts does not include:

- (i) Females who expose themselves
- (ii) Streaking
- (iii) Exposing the buttocks
- (iv) Nude bathing
- (v) Males exposing to other males
- (vi) The uncovering of the male genitals as a prelude to sexual activity between a consenting male and female.
- (vii) Sexual contact

#### **(2) What Exhibitionist Acts ARE**

Exhibitionist acts meet the following conditions:

- (i) A male is somehow able to draw an unsuspecting female's attention to his exposed genitals.
- (ii) The penis may be either erect or not erect.
- (iii) There may be full or partial exposure.
- (iv) The act is usually not pre-planned as to time and place, but may be the

result of a sudden urge on the spur of the moment or the climax of a build-up over several days.

- (v) There is NO intent to seek sexual contact.

## **Who is the Exhibitionist?**

Most Exhibitionists are between 20 and 30 years of age, with the greatest number in the 20 to 24 range. Cases involving men over 30 are less common and become increasingly rare in succeeding age groups. When an Exhibitionist act is carried out by a man over 40, some other factor such as alcoholism or premature senility is usually involved.

Adolescent males occasionally perform Exhibitionist acts, though not as often as adults. Cases begin to occur at ages 14, 15 and 16, decline in frequency through age 18, and then increase again as males approach 20 years of age.

Most of the very early incidents occur in and around the boy's home, the victims being younger girls and children. These cases may be explained as a distorted form of childhood sexual exploration and arise during or shortly after puberty.

The second onset, which occurs in the late teens and early twenties, may be explained in terms of the offender's anxiety and his inability to successfully court girls or interact with females in general.

Although Exhibitionists generally are of average to above average intelligence, they are often characterized as "under-achievers" in that they tend to fall short of their educational and occupational potentials.

Most of the Exhibitionists over the age of 21 are married. Their marriages are frequently marked by strife, tension, financial problems and unsatisfactory sexual relations.

Generally, unmarried Exhibitionists are shy, lonely and isolated, having few social contacts. They often experience feelings of inadequacy and look for ways of improving their self-image.

### **Who is the victim?**

Any female at some time in her life could be the victim of the Exhibitionist. It might happen when she is alone or when she is with one or more females. Young girls playing together outside are often the victims of Exhibitionists. Almost invariably, the victims are strangers to the offender.

### **Where and when does it happen?**

An Exhibitionist act can happen anywhere, anytime. The element of surprise and the offender's unfamiliarity with the victim are characteristic of this behaviour.

### **Subways**

Some incidents occur in subways when the offender is riding in a car carrying one or more female passengers.

### **Cars**

Most Exhibitionist acts are similar to the one involving Sue and the man in the parked car. Since the car protects and shields the offender, he can pick and choose his victims without worrying about other individuals who may interfere with his act.

### **Windows**

Although it is not too common, an Exhibitionist may stand by a window in his home and deliberately expose himself to female passersby. Sometimes he will try the opposite approach — stand outside the window of a store or home and expose himself to any females inside.

### **Parks and Playgrounds**

Young girls playing in parks, playgrounds or school yards are often the victims of Exhibitionists. The offender may pop out from behind a tree, bush, nearby house or building and take the children by surprise. Or he may just sit quietly on a bench and either fully or partially expose his genitals.



## What does he say or do to get a female's attention?

The Exhibitionist is primarily concerned with getting a female's attention. Sometimes he will summon her to his car under the pretext of asking her for directions, as in Sue's case. Occasionally, he may cough or make other sounds to get the female to notice him. The Exhibitionist seldom, if ever, makes suggestive or flirtatious remarks. The offender often appears very casual in his manner and does not give any indication to the female that he is aware of his genitals being exposed.

## Is he dangerous?

As mentioned earlier, Exhibitionism does NOT entail sexual contact. There is usually a fair distance between the offender and his victim when the act occurs. It is a commonly held belief that Exhibitionists are interested in further interaction with their victims. The majority of offenders admit they would run away if the female approached them. Exhibitionist acts are NOT preludes to sexual intercourse or rape.

## What does the offender get out of it?

Exhibitionists are interested in being seen and the majority of them report that they crave some sort of strong reaction from the female such as shock, fear, or disgust. However, anything which acknowledges their presence will help satisfy the Exhibitionist.

On completion of his act, the Exhibitionist feels some mild contentment and a sense of well-being. He then continues with his normal daily activities, but feels somewhat guilty about what he has done and fears the consequences of being caught. Nevertheless, the overwhelming urge keeps returning and the act is repeated again and again. It is not planned or pre-meditated and the offender does not

really know when or why he does it. The drive to expose himself is so powerful that he disregards the inappropriateness of his act and overlooks the possibility of being recognized or easily identified and subsequently caught.



## How does it affect the victim?

The immature female will likely misinterpret the Exhibitionist act. Reactions to it range from the denial of its occurrence to rage and fear. One of the most prominent factors affecting the victim's response is her erroneous belief that the Exhibitionist intends to approach her and then attempt to force sexual contact, perhaps even rape. The unexpectancy of the act and its moral offensiveness can cause the victim to panic. She may experience long-term emotional discomfort if she does not fully understand that the offender did not intend to engage in any sexual activity with her.

## Why does he do it?

The pattern of charges and convictions suggests a close link between psychological stress and Exhibitionism. When stressful periods are less frequent, the offender seems able to control or forget his urges, but as soon as his anxiety increases, he is liable to "act out", even after a period of self-control.

The most common characteristic of the Exhibitionist is his low self-esteem and insecurity in social situations, especially those involving females. Despite the fact that the majority of offenders are average or above average in physical appearance, they tend to describe themselves as unattractive to the opposite sex. They don't see themselves as being strong and masculine and often feel that their penises are smaller than average. Generally, the Exhibitionist is known to have a close relationship with his mother but not with his father, who is usually described as a passive and inadequate parent.

The Exhibitionist reports a narrow range of sexual experiences, and has rather prudish sexual ideals. Nevertheless, he is frequently married and able to have normal sexual relations. He feels very inadequate in most social situations.

## Pressures that lead to Exhibitionism

### (1) *Teenage Dating Expectations*

Often, the Exhibitionist has been unable to meet dating requirements. He has difficulty relating to girls and tries to find some way to prove his masculinity to himself. His frustrations lead him to Exhibitionism.

### (2) *Marriage Crises*

Most Exhibitionists marry by age 25, often in an attempt to overcome their loneliness and alienation, to gain a sense of belonging and acceptance. But the responsibility of marriage

frightens the Exhibitionist and he feels unable to measure up to the stereotype of the all-round adequate husband. Anxiety leads him to turn to Exhibitionism as a way of asserting himself. A poor sexual performance, an argument at home, or stress at work such as a reprimand, are varied disappointments and proof of inadequacy that seem to drive an Exhibitionist to prove he is a man by exhibiting his penis.

### (3) *Fatherhood*

The married man's fear of the added responsibilities of fatherhood has been cited as an underlying reason for Exhibitionism, as he again may fail to fulfil the stereotyped role adequately. In his immaturity he cannot handle being displaced as the central person in the marriage; he wants to receive attention and care, not give it.

### (4) *Middle-Age Crisis*

As previously pointed out, after the age of 30 an increasingly fewer number of men engage in Exhibitionist acts. After the age of 40 cases are very rare and usually involve other factors such as those noted earlier. However, there are some cases of Exhibitionism involving men over 40 and these cases are usually related to the "middle-age crisis".

Middle-aged men often experience a great deal of stress when they start measuring life achievements against goals. Some feel unsure of their abilities to continue providing emotional and financial support to their families. For some, these feelings of inadequacy become overwhelming. Exhibitionism seems to represent proof of the offender's ability to assert himself and give momentary relief from anxiety.

## How should the victim react?

As pointed out earlier, there is a strong likelihood that most females will encounter an Exhibitionist at some

time or another. If it should occur, here are some pointers to remember:

- (1) Report the incident to the police.
- (2) Be aware that there is little or no danger.
- (3) If the offender is exposing himself from a house, apartment, or car, try to note such details as an address or license number.
- (4) If the act occurs in an isolated or out of the way place, leave as quickly as possible.

(5) Anger and outrage, such as Sue felt when meeting the man in the parked car, are healthy reactions to Exhibitionism because a shocking invasion of privacy has taken place in that an "indecent" act has been unexpectedly forced upon the female's public awareness. This anger and outrage, however, should not be expressed to the Exhibitionist since a strong reaction is what he seeks.





### **How do you know if the person is not an Exhibitionist?**

Occasionally a person exposing himself may act in a manner that indicates he is interested in more than just exposing himself. Here are some clues to watch for:

- (1) The offender who uses very profane and abusive language.
- (2) The offender who approaches the victim in order to touch or fondle her.
- (3) The offender who follows the victim after exposing himself.
- (4) The offender who exposes himself to someone with whom he is acquainted, such as a neighbour. These offenders could be dangerous and are not to be confused with Exhibitionists.

### **How should the victim report the incident?**

Victims are often reluctant to report Exhibitionist incidents because they are embarrassed. They are shy about describing their experience. This discomfort would likely be reduced if the victim learned to use clinical or medical terms such as penis, masturbation, Exhibitionist and Exhibitionism instead of slang expressions, which tend to be awkward and don't accurately describe the incident.

### **How should the persons close to the victim respond to the incident?**

Unfortunately, many males do not understand how the female feels about having been the victim of Exhibitionism. Whether she is frightened, confused, or merely indignant, she has had an experience that could generate in her a negative attitude towards males. Although a victim may laugh at the incident, her laughter is likely a nervous reaction, for deep down she knows her experience was no joke. Males who are emotionally close to the victim, such as her father, brother, boyfriend or husband, should take the incident seriously and offer her understanding and support. To make light of the incident by telling the female she should have enjoyed it will build feelings of resentment and anger in her about males in general. The male who mocks the incident is supporting the myth that men are crude and insensitive creatures. The way in which those persons close to the victim respond to her experience will largely determine whether or not she will suffer any long-term negative effects.

## **How should professional and other workers respond to the incident?**

Any professional person, be he a police officer, probation officer or teacher, or any mature person who comes in contact with the victim, can be helpful. The first important step is to allow her to express her feelings, whatever they are, and to listen to her very openly and carefully. Having just been in a position where she received no respect and her feelings were shaken and perhaps assaulted, to be honestly listened to can increase her self-respect and respect for others. Her feelings of fear, anger and hurt should be exhausted before attempting to gather the necessary factual information to lay a charge.

## **How should children be educated?**

Parents should conduct open and unemotional discussions with their children about the inappropriateness of the act. They should explain that just as some people don't have good table manners, others act unmannerly in public by exposing themselves. Children should be clearly and calmly instructed to avoid persons who expose themselves or want to engage in a mutual exploration of their bodies. Children must be made to understand that a person's sex organs are not "bad" or "dirty", but that there are proper times, places, and ways to deal with them.

## **Inappropriate attitudes of the Exhibitionist's family**

Members of the Exhibitionist's family tend to discount the existence of a problem. Parents of the teenage offender either deny the occurrence of the act or pass it off as a prank. The mothers of the offenders are inclined to refute any allegations that their sons have sexual or social problems. The families of unmarried Exhibitionists in the 20 to 30 age range tend to assume

a similar "indignant" or "blind-eye" attitude. They may even value their son's tendency to be unsure, timid, isolated and withdrawn.

Both wives and mothers of the Exhibitionist appear to have two main features in common — a general appearance of competency and patience with the offenders. Unfortunately, the role of the "long-suffering good women" may only add to the problem in that the Exhibitionist's state of dependency is maintained.

## **Can Exhibitionists get help for their problem?**

There are a variety of clinical methods which deal with the Exhibitionist and his problem. Among these are:

- psychotherapy
- supportive counselling
- marital counselling
- behaviour therapy
- reality therapy
- courtship training
- drug therapies

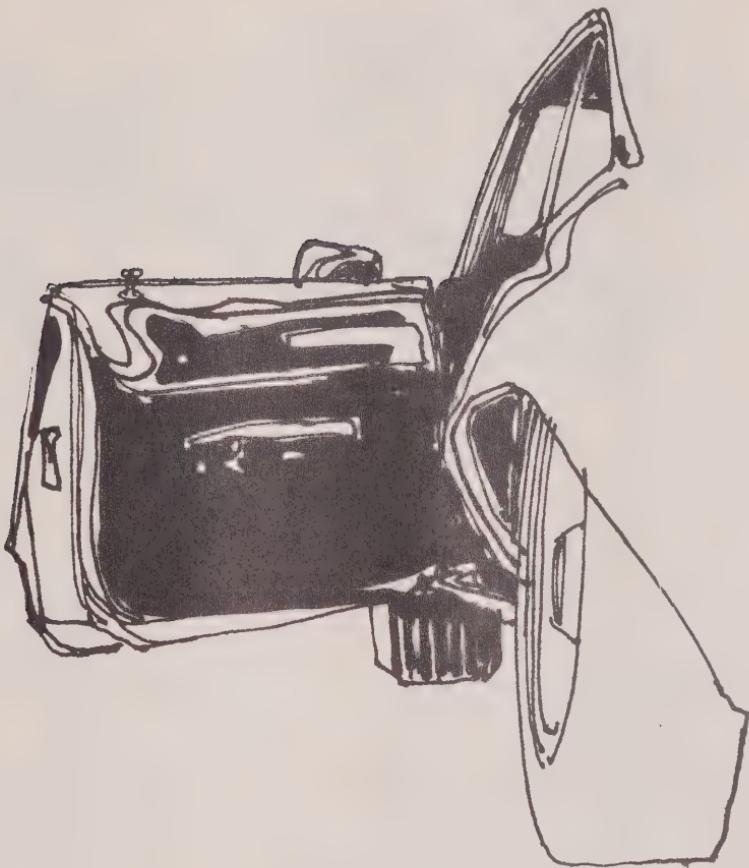
There are also community resources which can help the Exhibitionist in the areas of vocational (job) and avocational (hobbies) training. Some experts on the problem believe that if the Exhibitionist can gain suitable employment and develop socially acceptable interests and hobbies, his problem might be partially solved. Understanding laymen, clergymen, and service organizations can be valuable in helping the Exhibitionist with the underlying personal problems that lead him to turn to Exhibitionism.



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# CONCLUSION

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Exhibitionism involves everyone. From the offender and his victim to the families and friends of both, it is a major community concern. Since the act is a criminal offence, various agents of social control such as the police and courts play an active part. But a general trend is now developing in which cases of Exhibitionism are being referred for

help to clinical treatment facilities. Dealing with the underlying causes of the behaviour appears to be the most effective approach to the problem. With proper counselling, therapy, and the support of his family and the entire community, the Exhibitionist will gain greater insight into his problem, which



is the first important step towards resolving it.

But as long as Exhibitionism continues to exist, all of us must learn to cope with it. Our foremost concern is the psychological welfare of the victim, who fears that the act involves sexual assault. The official definition of Exhibitionism does not include the notion of sexual contact. Once the victim learns to recognize the act as that of an Exhibitionist, she need not fear anything. And after the incident has taken place, any anxiety she harbours about the possibility that she COULD have been harmed is irrational, having no basis in fact. However, as previously noted, the possibility of danger should not be ignored. The offender may not have been a true Exhibitionist.

The family and friends of the victim play an important role in her interpretation of the incident. They must provide her with the proper emotional support and convince her that her welfare was not endangered.

In the final analysis, the onus falls on the victim. Since she is the one who actually confronts the offender, her correct interpretation and overall acceptance of the act is extremely important to her psychological well-being. But whether or not she can actually keep her cool will depend a great deal on how her family, friends and the community at large respond to her experience. It seems wise to advise her to talk about her experience with someone who can help her to assess the situation accurately and deal with it appropriately.





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